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THE

BATTLE OF LONG-ISLAND:

A LECTURE,

DELIVERED BEFORE

THE NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY,

FEBRUARY 7, 1839.

BY SAMUEL WARD, JR.



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W. W. W.

labors ! So also are we the servants of posterity. The road is an emblem of the destiny of those who made it ; built for the use of a generation, passed over as the path to some near or distant land, succeeding races inquire not whose hands constructed it. They, too, are travelling toward their journey's end.

History and time are ours ; the index and dial-plate which measure our span, the foundations of our knowledge, and the standard of our computation, the instruments of spiritual and material comparison. But the one sits, like a queen, upon a throne, robed in purple, a sceptre in her hand, and on her brow a diadem, wherein each race of men enshrine a new jewel. Heroes and statesmen are her courtiers, and the brightest shapes of human intelligence hover around her. The other is creation's slave, fate's executioner ; unerringly reckoning the debt of man and of nature, the minutes of life, the seasons of the year. He reaps, with a pitiless scythe,

‘ Harvests of souls by Hope matured,
Garlands of self-devoted flowers ;
The spirit bright to life scarce lured,
The heart that mourns its saddened hours.’

Had authentic records preserved for us the whole experience of nations, the precious inheritance would have permanently advanced our material progress ; and in a still greater degree will the heritage of accurate memorials of the men and events of modern civilization, of the motives of the one, and the causes of the other, enlighten posterity in the path of human improvement. The traces of early society are proofs of material and sensual progress ; as for instance, the pyramid, and the bracelet upon the arm of the lonely king entombed within its giant walls. These are points of departure ; for the distance accomplished may be measured ; not so the route beyond. It is true, we know the virtues or the crimes of a few, in those days, when nations rose and fell, even as they now expand, and when the *many* felt not. *They* are now the lords of the earth. But only since the *fiat lux* of Guttemberg, have ‘ the people ’ begun to realize their long-withheld inheritance ; and events are now chronicled, less to gratify the pride of the living, or the curiosity of the unborn, less for purposes of narration and romance, than to show the increased capabilities of man, and swell the page of his moral experience.

Apart from the higher, the epochal incidents in the life of humanity, the epitomes of years, deeds, and nations, there are events which do not claim to be inscribed upon the page of general history ; and yet, from the deep local influence they once exercised, still preserve a com-

memorative interest, and convey an impressive lesson. The great war of our independence is rife with such illustrations. Its memories and heroes crowd so thickly near us, that its history cannot yet be written. But as each day adds to the legendary store, and we draw nigh the hour when it *may* be traced, time silently distils the mass of events, and the mingled vapors which ascend from the alembic, will be condensed by impartiality into truth.

The events we are about to recall, occurred in New-York, and its vicinity, between the months of September, 1775, and September, 1776. I am aware that these varying scenes and imperfect sketches may resemble a phantasmagoria, rather than pencillings of men and of actions. But they will be exhibited upon a curtain, stained with as noble blood as was ever shed in the cause of freedom; and though the hand that holds the transparent glass, be a feeble one; though faint the colors, and indistinct the outlines; the personages and scenes are not fictitious or fanciful; but once stood gallantly forth, with drawn sword or levelled musket, relieved by a battle-cloud rising from ground so near, that a cannon fired there at this moment, would startle with its reverberations the peaceful echoes around us.

The revolution was hardly three months old. But already from the cradle of liberty it had strangled its serpents at Lexington and Bunker Hill. The American army, encamped around Boston, owned WASHINGTON's command, and held at bay the beleaguered British. In the oppressed colonies, a spirit of resistance had organized the resolute yeomanry; and with the victories inscribed upon the national escutcheon, the patriotic chord was vibrating in every heart. War had not yet disturbed our goodly city, which lay in unconscious repose, on the mellow night of the twenty-third of August, 1775. One or two riots, the result of political faction, rather than of unadulterated rebellion, alone gave tokens of a turbulent spirit. The English governor, Tryon, still dwelt here, an object of courtesy, though of mistrust. In the North River, off the fort, lay the *Asia*, a British man-of-war, with whose presence people had become familiar. The public mind was in a state of vague apprehension. It remained for its hopes and fears to assume a definite shape.

Toward midnight, our forefathers were aroused from their first slumbers, by the thunder of artillery. At that silent hour, the ominous sounds were unwelcome visitants. The cannon peals were relieved by the sharp discharge of musketry; and the stillness that ensued, was occasionally broken by the hasty footsteps of one summoned to his duty, with unbuckled sabre trailing on the ground, or by the agi-

tated cry of a helpless woman, fleeing from the audible danger. Drums beat to arms, volley after volley announced the continuation of strife; and the half-wakened dreamer no longer mistook these cries of war for echoes of the eastern battles. As the night advanced, one body of men succeeding another was revealed by the blaze of torches, and the cumbrous wheels of the field-piece they were dragging, seemed to leave reluctantly the scene of conflict. By and by, troops of dwellers in the lower part of the town, escaped through the streets, from their menaced or shattered abodes, in confusion and fear. Was the enemy in the city? the Battery taken? Were the troops forced to retreat before a victorious foe? These interrogatories were breathed rather than spoken, or if put, were not answered. It was a memorable night, and something seemed to have delayed the approach of morning.

The town was early astir. At break of day, many inhabitants were seen issuing from their dwellings, and wending their way to the Battery. To those already assembled there, when night uprolled her curtain of clouds, the glowing dawn that shot over our noble bay, disclosed traces of disorder, and ravages of cannon-ball, on the one hand, and on the other, the smoke still ascending from the angry artillery to the powder-stained rigging of the *Asia*. Moreover, the field-pieces, which but yesterday guarded the Battery, were gone. These the timid accepted as tokens of danger, and prepared to depart; the intrepid hailed them as auspicious omens of future victories.

The twenty-one pieces of ordnance had been removed, by order of the Provincial Congress. Captain John Lamb's artillery corps, and the 'Sons of Liberty,' headed by 'King Sears,' were the heroes of the adventure. The efforts of the enemy to protect these royal stores, had proved unavailing. Warned of the intended movement, Captain Vandeput, of the *Asia*, detached an armed barge to watch, and if needful, interfere with, its execution. A musket discharged from this boat, drew Captain Lamb's volley, and a man on board was killed. The *Asia* fired three cannon. The drum beat to arms in the city. The man-of-war sustained the cannonade. Three citizens were wounded, and the upper parts of various houses near Whitehall and the Fort, received much injury. A son of Captain Lamb, whose regiment covered the cannon's retreat, is now living in this city, and in the rooms of the 'Historical Society' may be seen one of the very balls fired into New-York that night.

Captain Sears, the other leader of this exploit, was one of our earliest patriots. As far back as the fifth of March, 1775, in an encounter between the Whigs and the Tories, the latter, being worsted,

were said to have dispersed, lest King Sears, as he was called in ridicule, in his fury should head a mob, and do them some capital injury. He had been a member of the New-York Provincial Congress, had acted a conspicuous part in the excitements occasioned by the Boston Port Bill, and was in after months warmly recommended by General WASHINGTON to Major General Lee, for his zeal and fidelity. Immediately after this affair, he disappeared from our city, and sought, in Connecticut, livelier sympathies than were *then* to be encountered here.

A detailed account of the Asia affair, and of its consequences, may be found in the columns of the 'New-York Gazette,' a newspaper issued in those days from the south-east corner of Wall and Pearl-streets, by one James Rivington, a loud-voiced royalist. It is almost impossible to turn over its time-stained leaves, filled with the records of frivolity and faction, of benevolence and crime, of the current opinions and absurdities, and of the wants and supplies of an olden day, without reflecting on that strangest feature of modern times, the press, or imagining how different would be our views of remote ages, had the nations we admire, possessed so authentic a source of history. The Romans have been shown, by a recent French writer,* to have had their journals; but these did not, like ours, chronicle the wishes and feelings, the hopes and the vices, of the many; else we should not eternally deplore lost decades, or incur danger of having our early faith controverted by the ingenuity of a Niehbuhr.

James Rivington was, then, the editorial and proprietary publisher of the 'New-York Gazette,' and as the opposite party subsided in the expression of its political sentiments, and loyalism was no longer in terror of a Sears, he not only gave free vent to his own views, but so far forgot himself, as sadly to abuse those of his radical neighbors. Emboldened by their quiet reception of his denunciations, he expressed these in still more forcible tones, and doubtless exulted in this victory over whig opinions.

It was high noon, on Thursday the twenty-third of November. The Gazette had been issued that morning, and the worthy editor was seated in his cabinet, examining the new-born sheet, just like any gentleman of the press of our day, when the sound of hoofs on the pavement beneath, drew his attention to the window. Looking out into the street, he beheld with dismay, his old enemy, King Sears, at the head of an armed troop of horsemen, drawn up before his door. The men and their leader dismounted with the utmost deliberation, and a part of them entered the printer's abode. A few moments

* M. VICTOR LECLERC.

after, he saw his beloved printing-press cast into the street, and heard the tumult raised in the compositors' room above him, by those engaged in the work of demolition. To his despair, the materials thrown upon the pavement were speedily transferred to the dock, and the invaders sallied forth with many a pound of precious types in their pockets and handkerchiefs. A large crowd, collected by so unusual an event, stood aloof, quiet spectators of the scene. The cavaliers remounted their steeds, and rode off toward Connecticut, whence they came, and where, as was subsequently ascertained, the offending types were melted down to bullets. Thus liberty assailed the freedom of the press, and the balls whilome cast with joy into types reassumed their pristine shape and destination; the plough-share was re-converted to the sword.

Although no opposition was offered to these proceedings, by the body of citizens assembled near Rivington's door, there stood upon a neighboring stoop, a lad of eighteen years of age, with an eye of fire, and an angry arm, haranguing the multitude, in a tone of earnest eloquence. He urged that order should be preserved; appealing warmly to the dignity of citizenship, 'which,' said he, 'should not brook an encroachment of unlicensed troops from another colony,' and offering to join in checking the intruders' progress. The sins of Rivington could not be forgiven; but the youthful orator was listened to with respectful deference by that crowd, which already recognised the genius and fervor of ALEXANDER HAMILTON.

On the following Thursday, no Gazette appeared. Whether on this account, or because the town dignitaries were *really* incensed, this typographical execution created much sensation in the province. Fancying it a trampling on their authority, and a reproach to their vigilance, the New-York Congress complained to Governor Trumbull of Connecticut; and, demanding a restitution of the abducted types, they observed that the present contest ought not to be sullied by an attempt to restrain the liberty of the press. We shall not pause to weigh the political considerations involved in this inter-colonial dispute, which may have been the first respecting state rights. While New-York and Connecticut were at issue, poor Rivington went off to England, and there the matter ended. This event was deemed worthy the attention of congress, and seemed of sufficient importance to be laid before the reader. It is, moreover, the only remarkable incident which preceded the arrival of General Charles Lee in New-York.

Early in 1776, this brave but headstrong officer, begged to be despatched from Boston to Connecticut, for the purpose of raising vo-

lunteers, and of reinforcing the New-Jersey and New-York battalions under his command. With Governor Trumbull's aid, General Lee succeeded in levying twelve hundred men among the zealous inhabitants of that spirited province, and reached New-York with his recruits on the fourth of February. He was met on the frontier by the earnest entreaty of the committee of safety, who exercised the powers of government during the recess of our Provincial Congress, that he should pause upon the borders of Connecticut. Captain Parker, of the *Asia* man-of-war, had menaced the town with destruction, should it be entered by any large body of provincials. Undismayed by these threats, and disregarding the prayer of the timid corporation, Lee crossed the confines. Immediately after his arrival, conscious of the designs of the British in this vital quarter, and of the need of entire harmony between himself and the local authorities, he induced congress to take its jurisdiction out of the hands of these officers, and to detach from their own body a committee of three, who, with the council and himself, were to confer upon a plan of defence. His orders were to fortify the town, to disarm all persons unfriendly to the American cause, and especially to watch and counteract the movements of a band of tories, assembled on Long-Island; 'serpents,' says he, in his characteristic manner, 'which it would be ruinous not to crush, before their rattles are grown.' This duty we may fancy him to have undertaken with peculiar satisfaction. The operations of these tories and of Governor Tryon, their Coryphæus, would prove an interesting theme of research. It may be remarked, *en passant*, that though the city of New-York was stained in those days by strong imputations of toryism, the stigma was unjust. In mixtures of colors, it requires but little of a darker hue to deepen the brightest tints; and General Lee found the majority 'as well affected as any on the continent.'

During the short period of his stay, this officer's proceedings were extremely active. His intended fortifications were projected on a comprehensive scale. With an intelligent eye, he embraced the extensive localities to be defended, and detected their vulnerable points. A redoubt and battery at Hellgate were destined to prevent the passage of the enemy's ships to and fro in the Sound. Similar works were contemplated on the North River, and the oppugnable portions of the town were reformed and strengthened. Long-Island was too important a field to escape his vigilance; and he fixed, for the location of an entrenched camp, upon the very spot which subsequently became the scene of conflict.

It were presumptuous, nay useless, to attempt to picture New-

York as she then was, when so many readers, far more vividly than the writer, realize from memory the vast alterations less than half a century has produced in the metropolis of the new world. On the walls of the New-York Historical Society rooms, hang various interesting maps, whereby some idea may be formed of those ancient features and dimensions, from which, to the present magnitude of our city, the transition is as unparalleled as it seems incredible. The old Knickerbocker town is laid down on one map, as it existed under the Stuyvesant dominion. In another, may be found the English city, before and after that disastrous fire, of which the ravages are delineated in a separate drawing, by an ancient eye-witness. General Lee's letters represent military operations not easily traced upon the transformed surface. Broadway was barricadoed two hundred yards in the rear of the dismantled fort, and all the streets leading to it were to be defended by barriers. He speaks, too, of erecting batteries on an eminence, behind Trinity church, to picture which to one's self, at the present day, requires no little stretch of the imagination.

I know not whether these local changes may interest the reader, but to me they seem truthful illustrations of our fleeting destiny. Cities are the theatres of nations, where the busy throng enact an endless and varying drama, full of life and of reality. And, let me ask, what object can fill with a lonelier sense of desolation the wanderer beneath the sunny skies of Greece, or moon-illuminated heaven of Italy, than the crumbling walls, the deserted benches, the voiceless echoes of the theatre, where the living impersonations of the poet's fancy were once deified by the enthusiasm of the crowd? When the ruins of an old city become in turn the foundations of a new one, the pilgrim vainly seeks the traces of the past, and the lesson becomes still more impressive.

Monuments commemorate the peaceful traditions, and ruins the wars, of the old world. Surrounded by the vestiges of the past, its memories dwell in the European's thoughts. A tutored fancy evokes at will, from the tower and the column, the shades of the departed, and history may be realized, not in its events only, but in all its pomp and studied detail, its costume and its court. An unbroken chain, now of golden now of iron links; here bright, there rusted; here jeweled, and there blood-stained; connects to-day with distant centuries. In Cologne, the mind is transported back a thousand years, in Rome, two thousand. The edifices which time hallows, in lieu of destroying, are the only monuments of this new-born land.

The British General Clinton entered New-York simultaneously with General Lee. Unaccompanied by any force, he declared to the

latter that he had only come to pay his friend Tryon a visit ; of which Lee remarks, in a letter to the commander-in-chief, that ‘ if really the case, it was the most whimsical piece of civility he ever heard of.’ It was the subsequent fortune of these generals to meet in Virginia and in North Carolina.

The American officer’s turn for the humorous, was displayed by his giving our old friend King Sears, when sent into Connecticut to beat up recruits, the title of ‘ adjutant-general ;’ a promotion with which, he jocosely wrote WASHINGTON, the rough patriot ‘ was much tickled ; it added spurs to his hat.’ For all nominal distinctions, General Lee entertained unequivocal contempt, and declared that ratsbane were far pleasanter to his mouth, than the appellation of ‘ Excellency’ he was daily compelled to swallow. On the seventh of March, he departed for the South, where laurels awaited him among the orange flowers of spring. Lord Stirling was left in command, and the contemplated works were afterward but slowly and partially completed.

The town of Boston was evacuated on the seventeenth of March, by the British, who put to sea for Halifax. Crowned with this signal triumph, General WASHINGTON arrived at New-York on the fourteenth of April, with the American army, which, to use his own expression, ‘ had maintained their ground against the enemy, under a want of powder ; had disbanded one army, and recruited another, within musket-shot of two-and-twenty regiments, the flower of the British force ; and at last beaten them into a shameful and precipitate retreat, out of the strongest place on the continent, fortified at an enormous expense.’

On the twenty-third of May, the commander-in-chief found himself at Philadelphia, in conference with congress, who had summoned him thither, to devise remedies for the disastrous state of affairs in Canada. It was there determined to defend New-York, and the requisite men and supplies were placed at his disposal. Returning to the city, after an absence of fifteen days, he found great disaffection among certain of the inhabitants. This was nourished by Governor Tryon, who, from his vessel at the Hook, despatched emissaries in every direction. A deep plot, of his contriving, was only defeated by a timely discovery. His agents had so far pushed their temerity, as to corrupt not only many in the American camp, but even some of the general’s guard, a soldier in which, was found guilty, and shot. The object of this conspiracy was to make WASHINGTON a prisoner.

To secure Quebec, and redeem Canada, on the one hand, to make

a powerful impression in the south on the other, and finally, to possess themselves of New-York, proved to be the designs of the British, during this campaign. A part of their fleet from Halifax arrived off Sandy-Hook on the twenty-eighth of June. The remainder followed within a week, and General Howe established his head-quarters at Staten Island. In presence of a powerful enemy, gathering forces at the very door of the city, the troops were summoned to parade at six o'clock, one bright afternoon in early July. The British fleet lay in sight, and the assembled regiments knew not whether they were called together to attack or to repel. It was a fitting time and place for the proclamation of that glorious document, each word of which, well befitting a great nation speaking for itself, found an echo in every heart that beat there — the DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE. I can conceive the beams of that setting sun to have met a rival glow in the ruddy cheeks to which the warm blood mantled, under the inspiring words of liberty, drank in by willing ears. As the address ended, a shout of approbation rent the air. It was not the wild cry of a senseless mob on a holiday, but the voice of determination, which, to the close of that war, was the key-note of freedom.

This event, which transmuted into free states the dependent colony and province, rolls up the curtain from before the dramatic portion of my story. The arrival of Lord Howe from England, on the twelfth of July, and the daily reinforcements of the British fleet, from that period, justified expectations of a sudden assault. Preparations were continued under General Putnam, for the defence of the city, and General Greene was on Long-Island, superintending the erection of a chain of works, to fortify it against the enemy's approach. About this time, several of the British vessels, under a favorable breeze, ran by the New-York batteries, uninjured by their fire, and much to the surprise of the Americans.

On the eighth of August, General WASHINGTON wrote, that for the several posts on New-York, Long-Island, Governor's Island, and Paulus Hook, he had but thirteen thousand five hundred and fifty-seven effective men, and that, to repel an immediate attack, he could count upon no other addition to his numbers, than a battalion from Maryland, under Colonel Smallwood. Opposed to him, was the entire British force, united at Sandy-Hook, by the middle of the month, consisting of twenty-four thousand men, combined with a fleet of more than one hundred and thirty vessels, ninety-six of which came in from the twelfth to the thirteenth. Let the reader remember, that this armada was afloat off Sandy-Hook, between the heights of Neversink and Staten-Island. And who, on calling to mind this event, and reflecting

that, but yesterday, after a lapse of sixty-two years, a proud steamer was sent from England to this very city, then doomed to the fate of Carthage, now the inalienable ally of her former enemy, will deny that the growth of events maturing nations, is a wondrous characteristic of the age ; a token that in measure as it learns to ameliorate its condition, humanity is destined to cover the earth like the forest tree ; and that we do not, mayhap, sufficiently regard these intimations of a mighty future.

The details of war were rapidly advancing in the city, on which the eyes of the nation were intensely fixed. Lead being scarce, the zealous burghers gave the troops their window-weights for bullets. Of these, one house alone contributed twelve hundred and another one thousand pounds weight ; and I doubt not, had bow-strings been in request, our patriotic countrywomen would have hastened, like the Carthaginians of old, to offer up their longest tresses in the service of freedom. As the crisis drew near, the unseen anxiety of the commander-in-chief became redoubled beneath his clear eye and serene brow. He was every where, knowing no repose, the indefatigable guardian of the spirit of liberty.

Already was the army in possession of that memorable address, so fervently breathed by the great commander, while awaiting the attack : ‘ The time is now near at hand, which must probably determine whether Americans are to be freemen or slaves ; whether they are to have any property they can call their own ; whether their houses and farms are to be pillaged and destroyed, and they confined to a state of wretchedness from which no human efforts will probably deliver them. The fate of unborn millions will now depend, under God, on the courage and conduct of this army. We have therefore to resolve to conquer or die !’

At this juncture, General Greene unhappily fell sick of a fever, and the important station on Long-Island was entrusted to General Sullivan. It is impossible to compare the aims and prospects of the rival forces, at this period, without feeling how daring was the gallantry of the Americans, in venturing so fearlessly upon the unequal contest.

The long-expected hour of attack arrived on the twenty-second of August, when intelligence was received of the landing of the British on Long-Island. The report of their signal repulse at Fort Moultrie, by the Americans under General Lee, reached our camp on the preceding night, and was urged by WASHINGTON as an incentive to as proud exertions on the coming occasion.

By the twenty-sixth, the British troops extended from the coast

between Gravesend and Utrecht, to Flatbush and Flatlands; Colonel Hand's regiment retiring before them. General Sullivan was superseded in his command on the Island by General Putnam, and matters rapidly approached a *dénouement*.

The drawing opposite, is a sketch of the American lines at Brooklyn, and of the adjacent grounds on which the battle was fought. On reaching the encampment, of which he was so hastily placed in command, General Putnam found the American position secured by an inner and an outer line of entrenchments. The former was protected by a strong position upon an eminence, near the Wallabout bay, now called Fort Greene. The only approach to it was across an isthmus, formed on one side by the bay and contiguous swamp, and on the other, by a creek, running in from Gowanus Cove, with an impassable marsh on either side of it. This neck of land had been skilfully taken advantage of, by General Greene, and was perfectly defended by the entrenchments in its rear. The enemy were expected in three directions; along the coast; by the Flatbush road; and by the road which led from Flatbush to Bedford. To face them in these quarters, an outer line of works had been organized. A chain of picquets, extending from Yellow-Hook round to Flatbush, were stationed from eminence to eminence, to give timely warning of their approach; and the avenues were guarded by temporary breast-works, defending the main passes. Thus far, General Putnam adopted the defensive measures of General Greene, and these precautions proved successful, in the points they were designed to protect.

From an attack of the enemy's ships at the Narrows, the American rear was also guarded by efficient batteries, at Red Hook, and on Governor's Island. General Sullivan had in charge the whole line of outer works, and was joined by Colonel Hand, on his withdrawal from the coast, at the landing of the British, and by Colonels Williams and Miles, with their respective regiments.

Such was the position of the Americans; their numbers not exceeding eight thousand eight hundred men. Their adversaries, after landing on the twenty-second, parted in three divisions. The right wing, under Lord Cornwallis and Earl Percy, extended, on the twenty-sixth instant, from Flatbush toward Flatlands, about two miles in the rear. The centre, composed of the Hessians under General de Heister, was posted at Flatbush, and the left wing, on the coast, was commanded by General Grant. The centre was about four, and the right and left wings nearly six miles distant each from the American camp. A chain of thickly-wooded hills, called the Heights of

Gowanus, and extending eastward to the extremity of the Island, lay between the two armies.

The commander-in-chief passed the whole day of the twenty-sixth at Brooklyn, preparing for the expected assault. On the eve of this the first pitched battle of the war, his heart was full of anxiety. Consoled by the conviction that every thing in his power had been done to strengthen the American forces, he relied now upon Providence, upon the justice of the cause, and upon their bravery. Toward the close of the day, he returned to New-York.

On that afternoon, a spectator, to whom the interior of both camps could have been revealed, might have drawn a touching and interesting comparison. On one side, the hardened veteran; opposed to him, the ingenuous recruit; contrasted with the martial costume of the British, the worn and homely garments of the continentals; with the park of burnished artillery, a few cannon bought with blood; with polished arms and accoutrements, the long-rusted gun and sabre, torn down from the chimney-piece to answer a country's call. Among the British, a proud and conscious discipline; among the Americans, a tie of brotherhood, the feeling of men who would die for each other, in defence of an injured mother. Here the proud oppressor; there the patriot, resolved to do or die.

Our troops were, then, securely encamped for the night, the watch-fires lighted, the sentinels posted, the hum of preparation over; a challenge was now and then received and answered, and a guard relieved. The wolf hero had been late in the trenches. It was a still August night; a few soldiers lay within the tents; many slept in the open air:

—— ‘ their knapsacks spread,
A pillow for the resting head :’

arms and ammunition had been cleaned and inspected, and the sword loosed in its scabbard. Beneath the precipitous bank, flowed the ebbing waters of the unconscious bay, and the eye that looked on the city where WASHINGTON slept, found protection in the glance. In the ears of the hopeful American still resounded those stirring words of the orderly book, and many a heart beat as the hand grasped the gun, the blade. In the direction of the enemy, all was hushed; this silence, mayhap, was ominous. Did none within that camp gaze with mistrust upon the dark and wood-capped hills of Gowanus?

At half past two o'clock, passing clouds obscured the harvest moon; the night waxed gloomy, and the air chill. Suddenly, a sharp report of musketry, in the direction of Yellow-Hook, alarmed the

American camp. It was a startling sound, in the stillness of the morning, and the troops sprang to their arms, as the *reveillé* summoned each man to his duty. Many a brave lad awoke from dreams of peaceful home, of the father-house, and its loved inmates, where, in presence of the glad crops, the warlike sounds that lulled him to sleep seemed but as dream-notes, and the danger he anticipated, one that was passed. He had obeyed the watch-word of liberty, which called him to the hardships of war; but his heart told him life was sweet, and his cottage home a paradise. The drum rattled in his ear, and aroused him to the stern reality he feared not, courted not.

Ere the alarm ceased beating, the men had seized their muskets. Word had been passed from the remote picquets on the coast, that the enemy were approaching. Lord Stirling was instantly directed by General Putnam to march with the two nearest regiments to their encounter. These proved to be the Pennsylvania and Maryland troops, under Colonels Haslet and Smallwood; with whom, proceeding over the uneven ground in the direction of the attack, he found himself on the road to the Narrows, toward day-break, and soon met Colonel Atlee, with his Delaware regiment, retiring before the British, with the picquets to whose aid they had advanced. Stationing this officer on the left of the road by which the enemy were approaching, Lord Stirling formed his two regiments along an advantageous ridge, ascending from the road to a piece of wood on the top of a hill. The British were received with two or three warm rounds by the Delawares, who, as their ground became untenable, withdrew to a wood on Lord Stirling's left, where they formed.

The assailants, now in sight, proved to be two brigades, of four regiments each, under the command of General Grant. They proceeded to occupy the elevation opposite Lord Stirling, at a distance of three hundred yards. Their light troops came one hundred and fifty yards nearer, with a view to gain possession of a superior eminence on his left. As they marched up this hill, they were met by the deadly fire of Kichline's rifle-corps, who had just reached the ground in time to protect this important point, and who, as I was recently informed by an old man, then and yet living near the spot, mowed them down as fast as they appeared. The Americans brought up two field-pieces to oppose the *ten* of their opponents. A sharp cannonade ensued, and was vigorously sustained on both sides, to a late hour; until when, let us shift the scene.

While the Americans were occupied, as we have seen, on the previous evening there was, toward dusk, an unusual stir among the troops in the British right wing. The regiments already at Flatlands,

under Earl Percy, were joined at night-fall by those under Lord Cornwallis and General Clinton, who left the Hessians masters at Flatbush. The dark forms of the tall soldiery, the play of their muskets in the moonlight, the whispered order and firm tread of discipline, all announced some sudden or adventurous movement. One by one, the companies filed off in the direction of New-Lots, and before night was far advanced, Flatlands was deserted. As they moved farther and farther away from the American lines, the furrows became relaxed on the brows of the British commanders, and toward daybreak, half a triumph already gleamed in the eye of Clinton who led the van.

Shortly after daylight, the Hessians at Flatbush opened a moderate cannonade upon General Sullivan, who, with a strong detachment, had advanced on the direct road from Brooklyn thither, and now occupied the breast-works thrown up by General Greene, for the defence of this important pass. Colonels Miles and Williams were strongly posted on the Bedford road. At half-past eight, Count Donop was detached to attack the hill, by General De Heister, who soon followed with the centre of the army.

With levelled pieces and eyes fixed on the enemy, the Americans stood firm on their vantage ground, nerved for the assault, and prepared to enact a second drama of Bunker Hill. From behind breast-work and tree, soldier and rifleman looked down upon the ascending foe, with a feeling of conscious security ; when lo ! a report of artillery, in the rear of their left, flew with its own velocity along the line. A second volley revealed to them, with fearful truth, that the enemy had turned their left flank, and placed them between two fires. Horror, dismay, confusion, ensued ! The advancing Hessians were no longer faced by the whole band stationed to oppose them ; and vain the efforts of General Sullivan to rally the dispersing continentals, who hastened to regain the camp, while there yet was time. It was, alas, too late ! As regiment after regiment emerged from the wood, they encountered the bayonets of the British, and all retreat was cut off. Driven back into the forest, after desperate efforts to cleave their way through the close ranks of the enemy, they were met by the Hessians, a part of whom were at the same time detached toward Bedford, in which quarter the cannon of Clinton announced that he also was attacking the American rear. The British pushed their line beyond the Flatbush road, and when our brave troops found their only outlet was through the enemy, skirmish after skirmish ensued, in which they displayed signal bravery. Many forced their way through the camp, some escaped into the woods, and many were

slain. Colonel Parry was shot through the head, while encouraging his men.

I leave the reader to imagine the disastrous consequences of this surprise to the Americans, when, hemmed in by the surpassing numbers, and coöperating wings of the British, they saw inevitable death or capture, on every side. Here, striking again through the wood, and lured by an enticing path, which promised safety, they rushed from its shelter upon the drawn sabres of the enemy; there, retiring to its recesses before a superior force, they fell upon the levelled muskets of the Hessians; bullets and balls sought victims in every direction; and many a brave soldier sank to die beneath the tall forest tree, offering up with his parting breath, a prayer for his country, consecrated by his life blood.

Against the hottest of the enemy's fire, General Sullivan, on the heights above Flatbush, made a brave resistance for three hours. Here the slaughter was thickest on the side of the assailants. Fairly covered by the imperfect entrenchment, the Americans poured many a deadly volley upon the approaching foe. The old man, already mentioned, well remembers seeing a pit wherein large numbers of the Hessians, who fell here, were buried; and from another source, I learn, that, to stimulate the commander of these foreign mercenaries, he had been offered a golden substitute for every missing man.

Leaving Generals Clinton and Percy to intercept the Americans in this quarter, Lord Cornwallis proceeded toward the scene of General Grant's engagement with Lord Stirling. We left this gallant officer bravely opposing a superior force. He continued the resistance, until eleven o'clock, when, hearing a sharp firing in the direction of Brooklyn, it flashed upon him that the British were getting between him and the American lines. Discovering the position of Lord Cornwallis, he instantly saw, that unless they forded the creek near the Yellow Mills, the troops under him must all become prisoners. The reader will see that he had some distance to gain, before this could be effected. Hastening back, he found the enemy much stronger than he anticipated; and, that his main body might escape, he determined in person to attack Lord Cornwallis, who was posted at a house near the upper mill. This movement he performed with the utmost gallantry, leading half of Smallwood's regiment five or six several times to the charge, and nearly dislodging the British commander, who, but for the arrival of large reinforcements, would have been driven from his station. This band of four hundred, composed, say the British accounts, of youths, the flower of the best families in Maryland, sustained severe loss. But the object was attained, and the regiments

whose retreat it was designed to favor, effected their escape over marsh and creek, with the loss of a single man drowned. In his official report, Lord Howe speaks of numbers who perished in crossing the inlet. But this, I am convinced, is incorrect. The self-devoted heroes of this exploit were surrounded, and made prisoners of war.

We may readily conceive with what feelings their brethren in the camp beheld the undeserved ill fortune of the troops engaged in the action. General Putnam, a warrior of the true stamp, constrained to remain within the fortifications, and so little prepared for the events of the day, as to be only able, where the enemy appeared, to detach troops to meet them, saw with dismay the manœuvre which made them masters of the field. His efforts had all along been directed to General Grant's motions. For the defence in front, he relied on General Sullivan to provide, and great was his surprise, on seeing the enemy turn that officer's flank. As the engagement between Lord Stirling and General Grant grew warmer, his attention was attracted by the broadside which the British frigate *Roebuck* opened upon the Red Hook battery in his rear. Too late aware of his mistake, he was compelled to await the issue.

At this juncture, General WASHINGTON reached the lines, and beheld, with infinite grief, the discomfiture of his beloved troops. Wringing his hands, he is said, when he saw no aid could reach them, to have given vent to expressions of the keenest anguish. From the height he stood upon, the movements of both parties were revealed to him. Here, was seen Lord Stirling, gallantly attacking Cornwallis; there, a troop of Americans, escaping with thinned numbers through the British ranks, were pursued to the very entrenchments. By the creek, soldiers plunging into the unknown depths of its waters, or struggling through the miry bog, were fired upon by the foe; toward Flatbush, the Hessians and British were combining to enfold, in a still narrower circle, the few and undaunted continentals.

Lest the foregoing imperfect description should have left obscure some of the details of this affair, let me briefly recapitulate its successive disasters. I have supposed the reader to be, where all would have chosen to stand on that occasion, on the American side. A glance at the motions of the British, will show how admirably their manœuvres were planned and executed. The success of the concerted movement was insured by the unforeseen malady of General Greene. All the passes to Brooklyn were defended, save one; and it was by this that the troops, which decided the fortunes of the day, and were the same we left filing off from Flatland to New-Lots, on the previous night, turned the American flank. The road from Jamaica to Bed-

ford was left unprotected ; the enemy early ascertained this fact ; and, to enable them to profit by our neglect, General Grant's advance, which was a diversion, had been devised. The fleet and General de Heister cōoperated with him in this manœuvre. General Putnam, taking this feint for a *bona fide* attack, was deceived ; and the Americans were entrapped by forces superior in discipline, in tactics, in numbers, in good fortune, but not in courage ; for though eleven hundred were either killed or taken, near four thousand fought their way back to the camp.

To the absence of General Greene, who had studied, and would doubtless have guarded, all the approaches to the camp, and to the want of a general commanding officer throughout the day, may this disaster be attributed. General Putnam could not leave his lines, and the double care of New-York and Long-Island devolved upon the commander-in-chief. General Woodhull, who had been ordered to guard the road from Bedford to Jamaica, with the Long-Island militia, remained at Jamaica. The neglect which lost us the day, cost him his life. Riding home, after disbanding the volunteers under his command, he was captured by the British, and infamously cut to pieces, on his refusing to say, 'God save the king.'

Impartiality must award high praise, on this occasion, to the bravery of the enemy's troops, who followed so hotly in pursuit, that they were with difficulty withheld from attacking the American trenches. At night, the patriots within them told their missing brethren ; and when their loss became known, and uncertainty veiled the fate of the absent ones, gloom and despondency pervaded the camp. The victorious British, on the contrary, hastened to secure the ground they had gained, and, flushed with victory, passed the night in exultation.

On the twenty-eighth, a violent rain kept the two armies in their respective encampments. That night, the enemy broke ground within about six hundred yards of Fort Greene, and on the following day were busily engaged in throwing up entrenchments. Their main force was advancing, by slow but sure approaches, to besiege the American fortifications, and their superior artillery would doubtless soon silence our batteries. The advanced sentinel of the British army was surprised, on the morning of the thirtieth, by the unwonted stillness within the American lines. Calling a comrade or two around him, they proceeded to reconnoitre. Emboldened by the silence, they crept near the embankment, and cautiously peeping into our camp, perceived not a vestige of the army to whose challenges they had listened the night before. The alarm was given, and the party who first rushed in, to take possession of the works, saw in the mid-stream, out

of gun-shot and filled with well-pleased Americans, the last of the barges which had borne their comrades across the waters that night. Beyond it, in a small boat, there sat an American officer, of calm and dignified mien. On his pale countenance the anxious muscles were relaxing into a heavenly smile. This bark bore Cæsar and his fortunes ; and a prayer seemed to escape the lips of WASHINGTON, as a glance at the distant shore told him the American army was beyond the reach of danger.

Nine thousand men, with all their stores and ammunitions, crossed the East River during the night, unperceived by the enemy. For four-and-twenty hours previous, the commander-in-chief had not left the saddle. The immediate embarkation of the troops was under the direction of General M'Dougall, to whose vigilant activity high praise is due.

Incurious popular opinion has admitted this to have been a shameful defeat. I trust that all who have watched the phases of the day, and the concurrence of good and evil fortune on the respective parts of the British and Americans, will acknowledge the injustice of this decision. One great advantage of the assailant lies in the choice of points for attack, presented by any extensive field. This was peculiarly the case in the battle of the twenty-seventh of August. The outer line of defence was disproportioned to the force employed ; and the enemy's subsequent moves, compelling our army to retreat, proved the fortifications within, to have been planned on too small a scale for the defence of that part of the island.

It was no disgraceful rout. We have shown, that the troops behaved with high spirit ; and would that we might do justice to the distinguished courage displayed by the bands under General Sullivan and Lord Stirling, on this occasion. In particular, may the attack of the latter upon Lord Cornwallis, be singled out as a feat of chivalrous gallantry ; and the stand long maintained by the Marylanders, upon the hill, with flying colors, under the enemy's severest fire, be cited as examples of Spartan heroism. Some blame has been attached by Gordon to General Sullivan, for neglect of vigilance upon the unfortunate Jamaica road. This officer is defended by Judge Marshall, who observes, that the paucity of his troops, and the entire want of cavalry, forced him to rely upon General Woodhull for the defence of that pass.

It may be asked, why a defeat has been selected for my theme, in lieu of some one of the victories of the revolution. I answer, that even a reverse, when stamped by so much bravery, and incurred through such unforeseen ill-chance, is itself a high encomium upon the valor of our ancestors. We have no stronger comment to offer those who would stigma-

tise it, than our actual liberties. By falling, the infant learns to walk ; by losses, the merchant learns to gain ; by defeat, and all history tends to prove it, an army is taught to conquer. Moreover, the reverses imbue us with a saner spirit than the triumphs of the revolution. They recall to mind the price of our liberty. If success flushes the brow of the victorious, and lends impetuosity to determination, defeat still more powerfully operates to paralyze courage, and depression is its immediate, if not lasting, result. It is, then, a manlier study, to mark the workings of the spirit which took breath in discomfiture for renewed resistance at Harlem, where Leitch and Knowlton fell, and at White-Plains. Such a soul filled the breast of WASHINGTON. His glory lay more in retrieving the war's losses, throughout the long struggle, than even in the laurels of Princeton, and Trenton, and York.

This splendid retreat won civic crowns for the American hero ; and its parallel is only to be found in the Spanish campaign of the conqueror of Gaul. But the favorable breeze, the calm water, and the thick fog which, toward two in the morning, veiled the Americans from the British, and yet left the river clear, seem direct interpositions of that gracious Providence, which in after days, guided our revolution to victory.

I began this paper with the remark, that *all knowledge is history*. Who can now gaze upon our magnificent city, from Flatbush Hill, or wind his way among the populous streets, which intersect a portion of the old battle-ground, without owning that the chapter of past events I have reviewed, is the most instructive lesson we can derive from the metamorphosed present ? I recently visited the localities of this conflict, on one of those genial days, when the opening earth sympathises with the heart-thaw of memory. Beneath the fight-scene, the dead are soon to rejoin those who perished there. A grave-garden has been laid out among the hills of Gowanus ; and beneath the trees, quiet tomb-stones will soon be reflected in the lake, whose banks reëchoed, sixty-two years since, the alarum of soldiers *then* mirrored in its placid bosom, *now* engulfed in the stream of eternity.



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